

## POLISH WORKERS AND THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

Large-scale employment seeking immigration from the lands of partitioned Poland began in the 1870s – initially from German Poland. By the 1890s the majority of Polish immigrants were coming from the moral rural and underdeveloped Austrian and Russian lands. Polish immigrants, however, did not become involved in a significant way in the labor movement until the twentieth century. Only in the 1930s did the majority of them become part of organized labor. They did, however, participate and even initiate labor actions in support of their rights, better wages, and working conditions very early. These actions were communal in nature and often unexpected and spontaneous. Employers characterized these as “Polish strikes”. Poles also joined other groups in larger scale strikes and protests such as the Haymarket Riot.

By the 1880's there were Polish Knights of Labor lodges in several cities and Poles played a significant role in a number of major strikes in Detroit and Milwaukee such as the Bay View Mills strike. Eight Polish workers were slain in that strike. The key Polish involvement in labor activities in the 1890s was in the coalfields and Poles were one of the largest groups in the in the United Mine Workers. They were notably staunch supporters of the strikes of 1887, 1897, 1900 and 1902. In the Latimer Massacre of 1897 Poles made up half of the fifty-six victims of the Luzerne County sheriff's posse.

In the twentieth century, Polish immigrants in the packinghouses and stockyards, the needle trades, steel mills and textile mills enrolled in large numbers in the growing unions in those on the eve of the First World War. The organizing effort among Polish immigrants was supported by the growth and sophistication of the institutions of the immigrant community, ethnic solidarity, the presence of a small but articulate group of Polish Socialists fleeing repression after the 1905 Revolution in Russia and support from established unions with strong Polish locals such as the ACWA.

The elimination of many of the unions in the post-World War I period, particularly steel workers and butcher workers, and the post-war recession dampened organizing in the Polish community for more than a decade. It did not, however, destroy a belief in unions among the Poles. Drawing on the same solidarities, ethnic institutions and cultural factors that had supported the organization of Polish workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a cadre of Polish organizers with union backgrounds and left-wing politics undertook the organization of Polish workers when new conditions permitted in the mid-thirties. The new drive was aided by the presence of second generation workers who had grown up in the industrial world and former mine workers who moved to growing manufacturing centers such as Detroit and Cleveland, The catalyst for new militancy was the Great Depression which threatened the bases of the immigrant community: a secure job and the family home.

In the mid-1930's 600,000 Polish American workers came over to the new unions *en masse*. As they were the largest single ethnic group in key industries such as

mining, steel, autos, farm machinery, electrical goods and meat packing their support was crucial to the success of the unions. The Polish community's institutional infrastructure – fraternal halls, radio programs, newspapers and organizational networks – was utilized extensively by the fledgling CIO unions. In turn, the local Polish communities sought to integrate the new unions into the community structure and the movement produced a new cadre of grassroots leaders with strong loyalties to both camps and new organization reflecting class and ethnic interest such as the Polish American Trade Union Council. Polish women were notable for their militance in many of the organizing struggles. The longest sitdown strike in U.S. Labor History was by 1937 Detroit Cigar workers over 85% of whom were Polish.

The success of the union drives led, by the 1940's, to the institutionalization of the industrial unions which reduced their dependence on the Polish and other ethnic communities, a dependence with which the unions with their emphasis on class were never fully comfortable. In addition, the new Polish American labor leaders became increasingly marginalized as the left lost influence during the Cold War. The left's willingness to accept the new pro-Soviet regime in Poland and its version of the Katyn Massacre destroyed the credibility of the labor leader in the Polish community. Aside from a few well-known figures such as Joseph Yablonski (UMWA), Edward Sadlowski (USWA) and Richard Trumka (UMWA) Polish Americans, despite their numbers, never achieved prominent positions in the labor movement although many served at the level of locals.

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